

# FRIEZE

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### VERNE DAWSON

by Ronald Jones

This morning, a search on the Internet for 'Ted Kaczynski' resulted in 1,608 matches on Alta Vista, 1,023 on Google and 418 on Yahoo. Ironically, one of the very instruments Kaczynski's psychotic-survivalist instincts told him to fear most has immortalised him. Perhaps it's a little rough justice for the Unabomber, whose infamous manifesto was a sprawling sermon declaring the evils of modern life driven by technology. 'The industrial revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race' wrote Ted in his diatribe for The Washington Post and The New York Times, 'they have destabilised society, have made life unfulfilling, have subjected human beings to indignities, have led to widespread psychological suffering and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world'.

A small likeness of Kaczynski is one of two portraits in Verne Dawson's recent exhibition. The other is of Opechanconough, the Native American chief who was the brains behind the largest massacre carried out against the Virginia Colony. There were no results for 'Opechanconough' on the Web: his fate was to be erased beneath an instrument of the hegemony that his survivalist instincts told him to fear most. This is one of those modest, but hardly insignificant reminders of how the world works; so too is Dawson's appealing exhibition.

Opechanconough and Kaczynski were distant co-conspirators - survivalists prepared to act from their conscience. For each of them, blood ran in the streets. And this is the reason, I believe, why Dawson has included them in his exhibition. I can almost hear Opechanconough chiming in with Ted as he wrote: 'In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people'. Preserving individualism has often seemed to justify murder. It is surprising that this integral theme in Dawson's work is consistently overlooked in discussions of his paintings, which are usually described as bucolic, Arcadian vistas of the American landscape. How perfectly short-sighted.

Well, yes there are the idyllic paintings, which glance back towards aboriginal Manhattan - a sliver of green serenity lying beneath the vault of heaven, where native families romp and campfires sparkle. Or, if you prefer sci-fi, there's the fortune-telling painting depicting a future firmament above the Newark, New Jersey International Airport, in which jets fly about without the trail of soiling exhaust, and nudists can frolic below in the greenery around the airport. In this world, technology has no chance of suffocating personal freedom.

But do these pictures dramatise an American state of mind, or the refreshment of Albert Bierstadt's metaphysical expanse along the edge of the frontier? The answer is neither: these are visions worth killing for. They belong to the unhinged, Romantic delirium of Opechanconough and Kaczynski's drive to towards retribution channelled through a righteous revolution. And this is where Dawson's subject matter finally comes to rest: on how we value individualism, be it fanatical or otherwise. 'We have no illusions about

the feasibility of creating a new, ideal form of society', Ted wrote as if thinking about Opechanconough, 'our goal is only to destroy the existing form of society'. Like his faux-naif painting style, Dawson's message is direct. He ponders the glossary of 'individualism' - from flower children to survivalists, from lunatics to martyrs - and shows us how precarious the distinction is between them.